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What Are Your Real Interests?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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What Are Your Real Interests?

MR. BORIN: Some individuals have strong literary interests. They like to read and write. Some persons like to play an instrument, sing, or read about music. We say they have an interest in music. Others of us are interested in scientific things. Here today to discuss these very personal possessions we call interests—our likes or preferences—are Irwin A. Berg, Professor of Psychology from Northwestern University; Blanche B. Paulson, Coordinator of the Division of Guidance and Counseling for the Chicago Public Schools; and Lyle Spencer, Director of Science Research Associates, Incorporated.

Attitudes

Mr. Berg, I called the interests we possess our likes and preferences. Are those words good synonyms?

MR. BERG: Well, it is true we have likes and preferences, but it is a good deal more than that. I would say that our interests include attitudes, that is, a set or a readiness to act.

MR. SPENCER: It might even go further than that. Sometimes it helps if we think of them as main springs of people, or motivating forces that cause us to act.

MRS. PAULSON: I think of them as emotional responses to activities.

MR. BERG: We can say that interests are more specific since the action gives satisfaction when you indulge in it.

MR. BORIN: Mr. Berg, does everyone have interests or satisfactions?

MR. BERG: I would say as long as one lives one has interests in some way or another.

MR. BORIN: We have made reference to literary interests and musical interests. That indicates that they might be classified. Mrs. Paulson, do you have any way of classifying the interests you test?

MRS. PAULSON: Yes, there are various classifications of interest, some with quite descriptive titles. For instance, there are outdoor interests, those possessed by people who like to walk or garden; or mechanical interests, those possessed by people who like to tinker with machinery; and then, there are people who like to work with numbers, who enjoy taking care of treasury accounts in clubs.

Types of Interest

MR. SPENCER: There are almost as many different interests as people who have made tests for them. I think you could add a few more to those which are commonly used, such as persuasive interests, the kind of thing . . .

MR. BORIN: Used car salesmen probably have that type of interest.

MR. SPENCER: That is a good example. Another one you might mention is social service interest, the kind of thing that nurses do and that almost anyone who likes to help other people has in a large amount. Still, another one would be literary interest, the kind of thing that people who like to write or speak are usually high in.

MR. BERG: Could we lump them together in this fashion: human relation interests, that is, interest in dealing with persons, sometimes helping them, like a doctor or a nurse, sometimes selling them something, the way a salesman does; and, on the other hand, an interest in dealing with things, mechanical things, working with tools.

MR. BORIN: You tend to make me feel that these interests are very separate and distinct categories. Is that a true picture?

MRS. PAULSON: Well, they would be separate categories, but they come in patterns, that is, each individual has more than one interest.

MR. BORIN: In other words, a person might have strong literary interests and musical interests at the same time.

MRS. PAULSON: Yes.

MR. BORIN: Is that a pattern you frequently see in individuals, Mr. Spencer?

'High and Low'

MR. SPENCER: That does happen to be one of the things we notice frequently. Also, we notice that people who are high in certain patterns, may also be low in other things. For example, a musician is not likely to be too high in his scientific interests.

MR. BERG: You also often get an accountant who likes to deal with numbers. He may enjoy that sort of work very much, but he may not have high interest in social service activities where he is dealing with people.

MR. BORIN: We often hear the expression that orators are born, or senators are born, or mechanics are born. Do we have these interests from the very moment that we begin our life here on earth, Mr. Spencer?

MR. SPENCER: No, I don't think we could say that. As a usual thing, our interests are developed out of the kinds of experiences we have, although it is true that many of these interests begin to develop at a very early age. These interests, of course, change a lot until we get into the period of adolescence. But after the age of fourteen or fifteen, they are relatively stable.

MR. BORIN: Mr. Spencer mentioned the fact that experiences are important in developing interests. Are there any other important factors, Mrs. Paulson?

MRS. PAULSON: Well, of course, the social group to which you belong helps to set some of your interests. That is true in certain neighborhoods where youngsters like to drop out of school early. They do so partly because the interest of the group is not in completing school.

MR. BERG: You would say then, if you were to summarize it, that interests relate largely to learning. However, you do have, in addition to that, I think, an occasional physiological factor. For example, boys aren't interested in girls until they get into high school. Maybe we could say that is a wonderful thing. [Laughter]

MR. BORIN: That prompts me to ask this question: Do men generally tend to possess different interest patterns than women?

MR. SPENCER: Yes, I think we can say that is usually the case. That again would illustrate what Mrs. Paulson has already mentioned, that the interest patterns come out of the experiences we have.

Interest in Vocation

MR. BORIN: I think you have all said, in one way or another, that interests affect our daily lives. I would like to have you tell me where they touch us in our daily living. For example, are they important in the vocations we select?

MR. SPENCER: They are probably much more important than we have usually given them credit for being. I remember that some time ago Elmer Roper made a study of factory workers and found that more than half of the industrial workers over the age of thirty-five said that if they could go back to the age of fifteen and select their careers over again, they would choose a vocation that was different from the one in which they were then earning their living.

MRS. PAULSON: Well, of course, that is important, that is, interest in their feelings. But there are other factors which should be considered in selecting a career.

MR. SPENCER: Oh, that is true. This is only one of maybe half a dozen factors.

MR. BORIN: What are some of these factors, Mrs. Paulson?

MRS. PAULSON: Well, there is ability, for instance. Interest and ability are different things.

MR. BERG: Of course, that isn't the sole criterion, is it? You find that in this study that Mr. Spencer referred to, you had people with very high ability, individuals who were successful in professional fields, like doctors, lawyers, dentists, and professors. A good many teachers were in the group, and when they were asked, "Would you choose a different career, if you had it to do over again," twenty-nine per cent, nearly a third of the people in the professional groups, said they would. I think too many people go into a field, or into a job, largely on the basis of the economic return that is offered.

MR. SPENCER: We often find that no matter what type of vocation a person is in, he isn't properly suited for it. But usually by the time he gets through with all the training necessary for one of the professions, it is too late to go back and start over again.

I feel very strongly that it is important for us in our schools to help young people find out about their interests as early as we can.

Schools Important

MRS. PAULSON: And, of course, schools offer wonderful try-out opportunities for them to test their interests. There isn't any doubt about that.

MR. SPENCER: It gives them a chance to have a wide variety of experiences that they may never have again.

MR. BORIN: In other words, you think that the way to find out what you are interested in is to have a great number of experiences, and then to make your choice on that basis.

MR. SPENCER: That is right. Although, Mr. Borin, there is another point that I think we ought to bring in. A person can't select an occupation or a career solely on the basis of what he wants to do. There are a lot of things we don't like to do that we have to do.

MR. BORIN: It is possible, then, to start out doing something that we don't like to do, and then develop an interest in that job.

MR. BERG: Of course, sometimes you could say that you get a partial satisfaction in your job. No job will satisfy all interests. I think Spencer would agree with that. But, you must also recognize that you can get a kind of an outlet in other areas, in hobbies, or organizations that you belong to, which will give you some opportunity to satisfy the broader patterns of interest which you may happen to have.

MRS. PAULSON: Perhaps sometimes people are dissatisfied with their occupations after they have been in them for some time, because when they chose the occupation, they thought in terms of one interest, whereas nearly every vocation requires a number of interests. As we work in our jobs, we sometimes have to do some things that we don't enjoy doing.

MR. SPENCER: And it doesn't mean either that because you like a given activity you are necessarily going to be successful in it. Many people are very successful in things that they really don't like to do. A rule of thumb that we sometimes use is that if you like something, it adds perhaps ten or fifteen per cent to your likelihood of success in it.

MR. BORIN: In other words, we can summarize here by saying, that interests are not the whole picture in and of themselves, but a very important part of the picture when we select vocations.

MR. SPENCER: Yes, as Mrs. Paulson said, it is one of a half-dozen or more factors that we ought to consider in the selection of a vocation, or in the other areas of life, too.

Stresses Ability

MR. BERG: I would like to stress ability there. A lot of times an individual may be interested in something, but not have any likelihood of success in it because of a rather marked lack of ability. If I may take myself as a case in point, I enjoy the ballet, but weighing two hundred pounds, I assure you I will never be a ballet dancer.

MR. BORIN: Does the two hundred pounds help you at all, Mr. Berg, as a psychologist?

MR. BERG: I don't think it does as a psychologist, but you should have seen me out in the garden yesterday, when I was wielding a cultivator.

MR. BORIN: You have outdoor interests, then?

MR. BERG: Well, not only that, I have enough weight that I can make it move, you see. I have the interests that go with being a psychologist, but the ability that goes with being a coal heaver.

MR. SPENCER: Mrs. Paulson is another good example showing the importance of interest in success. She wrote a book for us about a year ago. It was a book entitled, *Counseling Adolescents*. It was the first in a guidance series that we were doing. There are going to be seven or eight books in the series. She finished her book nearly a year before any of the other authors. Maybe you have high literary interests?

MRS. PAULSON: I do.

MR. BERG: A lot of ability, too.

MR. SPENCER: Well, ability goes with it.

MR. BORIN: Probably a lot of fortitude, or perhaps a lot of leisure time. Can we accuse you of that?

MRS. PAULSON: Well, it depends on who is listening.

'A Myth?'

MR. BORIN: A while ago we talked about job patterns, which, I think, would show the belief that there is a certain job for every person is really a myth. Would you like to elaborate a bit on that, Mr. Spencer?

MR. SPENCER: Well, I am sure there is no such thing as the one job for one person. There is something like thirty thousand different ways of earning a living in our country, and I don't doubt that any ordinary individual could be successful in scores or even maybe hundreds of them.

MR. BORIN: But you would still say that he would be more successful if

he were to choose one of those jobs that had high interest for him?

MR. SPENCER: I think it would increase his likelihood for success, although, of course, there are all these other factors to be considered, too.

More Education

There is one other thing you might say in that connection. The more education a person has, the wider variety of choices in selecting a vocation he has, which I think is one of the important reasons for every young person to get as much education as he can.

MR. BORIN: Is there any danger in always doing the thing that interests you. I am thinking along this line: Many times, we all know, we have to do things that don't interest us particularly. I am wondering if it isn't good training once in a while to do things that really aren't high on our interest scale.

MR. BERG: Yes, I think it is an excellent idea. I am not referring to the old Victorian notion of doing some things that you don't like to do every day. As Mark Twain said, he did two things like that every day. He got up in the morning and went to bed at night. [Laughter] But there are so many aspects of any job that there are bound to be some of them that are thoroughly unpleasant. We noted that there are over thirty thousand different ways of earning a living. Those are grouped into job families. These families, just like all families, are related. Consequently, I think we can say that an individual could do a lot of things and do them well, but there will be aspects about any job that he thoroughly dislikes. Thus, he will have to get satisfaction in another area. For example, where you work and with whom you work is just about as important as the job itself.

MRS. PAULSON: I am glad you mentioned that, Mr. Berg, because after all, when you select a vocation, you are selecting something more than just a forty hour a week job.

MR. SPENCER: You are really selecting a way of life.

MRS. PAULSON: Yes, you are, because you will be with people, and their outside interests as well as their job interests will have something to do with your life.

MR. BORIN: I think we are all acquainted with persons who have a great number of interests and who scatter their activities. Is there any danger in following too many paths, in following too many interests that you might have?

MR. SPENCER: Well, we found quite a few people who have such a wide variety of interests and such a wide variety of talent that it is hard for them to settle down to any one thing and do it well. It is the old business about the "Jack of all trades and master of none."

MR. BORIN: Previously we talked about experience as an important factor in determining your interests. We know that there are certain persons who never have the opportunity to have the necessary experiences as a basis upon which to make a vocational choice. Are there any other methods that a person might use to find out exactly what his interests are.

Methods of Discovery

MR. BERG: You can do a number of things. If it is impossible for you to get in direct contact with the field by working in it, you can always do some reading about it, or you can use psychological tests. They are not perfect; they are not infallible, but they are about the best measure that we now have for determining interests, and for that matter, abilities and aptitudes, also.

MR. BORIN: Mrs. Paulson, you have used those tests. Do you place much faith in them?

MRS. PAULSON: I think they are excellent for assisting people who really don't know what they are interested in. Of course, my work is all done with high school students, and they get a great deal out of taking such tests.

MR. SPENCER: You wouldn't say, though, Mrs. Paulson, that an in-

terest test is the sole basis on which to measure?

MRS. PAULSON: No, I should say not. You have to have some corroborating evidence before those tests mean very much.

MR. SPENCER: We like to think of them as another tool to use in helping the young person find out the kinds of things he might like to do, particularly when he hasn't had too much practical experience.

Skill Necessary

MR. BERG: I would like to stress one thing that has bothered me. The tests are excellent, they are good measures, provided that they are interpreted by a skilled counselor. I think that is absolutely essential because frequently you find individuals trying to give psychological advice or personal guidance by mail and it just doesn't work out. You need an individual who will take into consideration these other factors that Mr. Spencer and Mrs. Paulson mentioned, and they are perhaps the most essential things. The tool which is used must be applied to an individual.

MR. SPENCER: Certainly no test is any better than the person who interprets it. There are a great many psychological crackpots who are making a business out of testing for interests without adequate psychological training. We get a great many calls from people asking where they can go to take these tests. I think the safest thing to do is to go to the school principal or superintendent and get his advice about where you can get this kind of psychological help.

MR. BERG: Or your university department of psychology or the college of education in any university will make recommendations of that sort.

MRS. PAULSON: Or the professional psychological associations.

MR. SPENCER: In Illinois, I think there is an accrediting agency set up by the state Psychological Association, that has a list of reputable agencies from which you can get help.

MR. BORIN: We have been spending

a great deal of time on the relationship of interest to the selection of vocations. We mentioned earlier that interests are also very important in school and marriage and some of the other things that touch us in our everyday living. How important are interests in success in school?

Success in School

MRS. PAULSON: Interest is a large factor in determining success in school, but I wouldn't say that it was the only factor and sometimes it isn't even the important one. There are many youngsters who have done very well in classes in school in which they really didn't have much interest. And sometimes they develop an interest just from the very effort they put into the work.

MR. SPENCER: Isn't it also true that frequently these interests of children in school is part of the pattern of the group to which they belong? I think you told us about the problem of drop-outs in some Chicago schools, about neighborhoods where it is actually fashionable to drop out of school.

MRS. PAULSON: I wouldn't say that is just true of Chicago. That was almost a statement, just as you have given it, made at the Work Conference on Life Adjustment here in January.

MR. SPENCER: I remember when I was in school, at least in prep school, it was considered that "C" was a gentleman's grade. It wasn't good to get grades that were too high.

MR. BERG: You have the reverse of that when you get some individuals who go to school and keep going to school because it is the thing to do. They want to keep on going to school simply because people in their neighborhood or in their particular group say, "Of course, you must go to college." The fact that you haven't the ability and so on is beside the point.

MR. SPENCER: Isn't it true that there is very little relationship between the types of people that go to college and the amount of ability they have, or is that an embarrassing question?

MR. BERG: Well, there is some rela-

tionship between that and the amount of money they have. [Laughter]

MR. BORIN: There is something that has puzzled me all the way through this discussion. It seems to me that it is very evident that a person knows his own interests, that you do the things you like to do. There is nothing mysterious about it. As a matter of fact, you can sit down with a piece of paper and a pencil, and list the thing that interests you. Is that true?

'No Idea'

MR. SPENCER: That is a surprising thing, but it is generally not true, Mr. Borin. Our studies have shown over a period of many years that relatively few young people really have a good idea of what they like. That is in part due to the fact that they haven't yet had a wide variety of experiences, but it is also due to the fact that many young people think they would like to become a lawyer, let's say, or a businessman, solely on the basis of whether their father or some friend they admired did that without getting down and thinking through their own interest pattern.

MR. BORIN: Then we may be unaware of the real interests that we have. Is that the point you are making?

MR. SPENCER: I think that most people are at least unaware of many of their interests.

MR. BERG: I think we could also say that a lot of times we are misled by one factor and think that is the only factor in interest. You find a lot of youngsters, for example, that feel that because they are good speakers they ought to become good lawyers, and actually, the speaking ability required of a lawyer is not necessarily of a very high order.

MRS. PAULSON: They think in terms of one interest, whereas they have to have many interests on a job. Of course, more career information that young people have the less they will make that mistake.

MR. BORIN: What about success in marriage? Is it a good idea to know your interests and the interests of your prospective mate?

MR. BERG: Yes, indeed. Individuals with the same interests make successful marriages. That has been substantiated time and again. Activities, things that they like to do together, that they can share, whether it is working out in the garden, or wood-working or whether it is some other activity that both the husband and wife enjoy, and they can indulge in as a team, really makes for a more successful marriage.

MR. SPENCER: Perhaps even wiping and washing the dishes.

MR. BERG: Oh, no, no. [Laughter]

MR. BORIN: I do hope the day doesn't come when we administer tests to find out who should be married and who should not be married. Would you agree there?

MR. SPENCER: There are, surprisingly enough, a good battery of tests on that. As a matter of fact, they have quite good predictive possibilities.

MR. BORIN: We have discussed success in school, success in our vocations, and even success in marriage. In closing, I would like to throw out this question: Are interests important in the hobbies we choose and in selecting activities for the leisure time that we have?

Hobbies

MR. BERG: Yes, they are very useful in a number of ways. Hobbies provide outlets for the interests that are not cared for by the job, and as we noted earlier, the job doesn't provide an outlet for every interest a person might have.

MRS. PAULSON: Particularly creative interests. So many jobs are routine in nature.

MR. SPENCER: It is frequently said, I think, that unless a person has an outside interest that has nothing to do with his job, he is not likely to be a well-adjusted person.

MR. BORIN: You don't believe, then, that if you have a hobby, it is an indication that there is something wrong with your job.

MR. SPENCER: It is just the opposite, I would say. It is an indication that

you are an adjusted person and it will probably make it easier for you to do better work on your job.

MR. BORIN: You have suggested in the discussion that we live happier lives when we develop new interests. Mr. Berg, will you tell us specifically what each of us can do to develop these new interests?

New Experiences

MR. BERG: I would suggest that the individual get new experiences—new experiences in clubs, in social groups—travel, read widely, talk to people—people you haven't met before—join an adult education class. In general, I would say strive to keep flexible and adaptable, receptive to new activities and to new ideas.

MRS. PAULSON: Yes, get out of the old groove, buy a different magazine next time, or try a non-fiction library book on a new topic, or listen to another kind of radio program. Then explore the new ideas and the ideas that those ideas suggest. One new idea leads to another in a kind of chain reaction.

MR. SPENCER: We can say that most of us have about as many different interests as we have different groups to which we belong, and one of the problems most people have as they grow older is that they reduce the number of groups and activities in which they are engaged. That is a very important part of adjustment—having a wide variety of experiences and continuing to have them. One of the things we have found that often works is that in this exploring of new ideas and new activities, it helps a lot to have someone do the exploring with you.

MR. BORIN: May I say, Mrs. Paulson and gentlemen, that you have underlined, in this discussion, the importance of discovering our real interests so that we can go ahead and develop them in building a more satisfactory life. You have gone further to suggest ways of discovering our interests and utilizing them in our everyday activities.

Suggested Readings



Compiled by Barbara Wynn,
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University

CARTER, HAROLD D. *Vocational Interests and Job Orientation*. California, Stanford University Press, 1944.

Short but comprehensive survey of the field of interest testing.

FRYER, DOUGLAS. *Measurement of Interests in Relation to Human Adjustment; with an Introduction by Lewis M. Terman*. New York, Holt, 1931.

The "standard reference book" on the subject of interests.

KUDER, GEORGE FREDERIC, and PAULSON, BLANCHE B. *Discovering Your Real Interests*. Chicago, Science Research Associates, Occupational Information Division, 1949.

PAULSON, BLANCHE, and HAMRIN, S. A. *Counseling Adolescents*. Chicago, Science Research Associates, 1950.

Addressed to high school and college counselors.

STRONG, EDWARD KELLOGG. *Vocational Interests of Men and Women*. California, Stanford University Press, 1943.

Includes findings on "differences of interest patterns between various social groups."

SUPER, DONALD EDWIN. *Avocational Interest Patterns; A Study in the Psychology of Avocations*. California, Stanford University Press, 1940.

A study of hobbies, including the relation between adolescent and adult hobbies, and between vocations and hobbies.

THORNDIKE, EDWARD LEE. *Adult Interests*. New York, Macmillan, 1935.

Discusses the possibility and the ways of modifying and improving interests in adult years.

THORNDIKE, EDWARD LEE. *Psychology of Wants, Interests and Attitudes, by . . . and the Staff of the Division of Psychology of the Institute of Educational Research, Teachers College, Columbia University*. New York, Appleton-Century, 1935.

The facts on the "dynamics of wants, interests, attitudes, and emotions." Considers how interests guide thought and action, and how they themselves are strengthened, weakened, and changed.

Business Education World 21:287-91, D., '40. "Aspiration, Interest, and Achievement." R. M. DORCUS and K. DUNLAP.

Discusses the role which interest actually plays in aspiration and achievement.

Education 66:448-53, Mr., '46. "Testing of Occupational Interests." W. B. MICHAEL.

Pointing out the usefulness of occupational interest inventories, discusses the problems involved in the testing of interests.

Journal of Applied Psychology 25:59-66, F., '41. "Relationship Between Self-estimated and Measured Vocational Interests." R. BEDELL.

Concludes that "students' self-estimated vocational interests are insufficient evidence upon which to diagnose the amount of satisfaction that will be obtained in a vocation."

Journal of Social Psychology 21:65-79, F., '45. "Relation of Childhood and Adult Leisure Activities." C. PATRICK.

Information on the correlation between childhood and adult hobbies and other recreational activities.

Occupational Psychology 13:42-51, Ja., '39. "The Place of Interests in Vocational Adjustment." J. G. W. DAVIES.

Suggests that while specific interests are often unreliable vocational guides, the knowledge of broad groups of interests can be of assistance in vocational counseling.

Occupations 20:270-5, Ja., '42. "Using Interests as the Basis of Vocational Choice." E. G. DI MICHAEL.

Warns against overstressing the use of interest inventory in vocational guidance.

Readers' Digest 43:88-90, S., '43. "What Are You Good For?" E. MULLER.

Describes the aptitude testing done at the "Human Engineering" Laboratories in New York, Boston, Chicago, etc.

School Life 28:25-9, D., '45. "Interest Measurement; Questions and Answers." F. M. FOWLER.

Answers questions on "what is interest? are self-estimated interests dependable? what relationship does interest have to ability?" etc.

Survey 84:327-9, N., '48. "Truth About Aptitude Tests." G. J. BARNETT.

Tells why aptitude is not synonymous with interest.

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